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The Role of Business in Moving from Linear to Circular Economies

Glossary

This glossary is compiled by the Global Assessments Unit of UNEP. Sources for all definitions can be found here.

Agroecology
An ecological approach to agriculture that views agricultural areas as ecosystems and is concerned with the ecological impact of agricultural practices.

Billion
One thousand million, i.e. 10^9.

Biomass
Organic material above and below ground and in water, both living and dead, such as trees, crops, grasses, tree litter and roots.

Capital
A resource that can be mobilized in the pursuit of an individual's goals. This can be natural capital (natural resources such as land and water), physical capital (technology and artefacts), social capital (social relationships, networks and ties), financial capital (money in a bank, loans and credit) and human capital (education and skills).

Circular economy
A circular economy is a systems approach to industrial processes and economic activity that enables used resources to maintain their highest value for as long as possible. Key considerations in implementing a circular economy are reducing and rethinking resource use, and pursuing longevity, renewability, reusability, reparability, replaceability and upgradability for resources and products that are used.

Civil society
The aggregate of non-governmental organizations and institutions representing the interests and will of citizens.

Climate change
The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change defines climate change as "a change of climate which is attributed directly or indirectly to human activity that alters the composition of the global atmosphere and which is in addition to natural climate variability observed over comparable time periods".

Conservation
The protection, care, management and maintenance of ecosystems, habitats, wildlife species and populations, within or outside of their natural environments, in order to safeguard the natural conditions for their long-term permanence.

COVID-19
Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is defined as an illness caused by a novel coronavirus known as severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2; formerly 2019-nCoV), which was first identified following an outbreak of respiratory illness cases in Wuhan City, Hubei Province, China. It was initially reported to the World Health Organization (WHO) on 31 December 2019. On 30 January 2020, WHO declared the COVID-19 outbreak a global health emergency, upgrading it to a global pandemic on 11 March 2020, its first such designation since declaring the H1N1 influenza a pandemic in 2009.

Crop
The total amount collected of a plant, such as a grain, fruit or vegetable, grown in large quantities.

Deforestation
Conversion of forested land to non-forest areas.

Driver
The overarching socioeconomic forces that exert pressures on the state of the environment.

Ecosystem
A complex network of plant, animal and microorganism communities and their non-living environment that interacts as a functional unit. Ecosystems may be small and simple, such as an isolated pond, for example, or large and complex, such as a tropical rainforest or coral reef in tropical seas.

Ecosystem health
The degree to which ecological factors and their interactions are reasonably complete and function for continued resilience, productivity and renewal of the ecosystem.

Environmental degradation
Environmental degradation is the deterioration in environmental quality from ambient concentrations of pollutants and other activities and processes, such as improper land use and natural disasters.

Food security
Physical and economic access to food that meets people's dietary needs as well as their food preferences.

Food system
Food systems are usually conceived as a set of activities ranging from production to consumption. They are a broad concept that encompass food security and its components – availability, access and utilization – and include the social and environmental outcomes of these activities. Globalization has largely transformed food systems in developing countries, a change which offers significant opportunities for food workers to access new and better employment. However, small-scale food producers and other food workers are still often excluded from the benefits generated by food businesses.

Food value chains
These comprise all the stakeholders who participate in the coordinated production and value- adding activities that are needed to make food products.

Fossil fuel
Coal, natural gas and petroleum products (such as oil) formed from the decayed bodies of animals and plants that died millions of years ago.

Gender
Gender refers to the roles, behaviours, activities and attributes that a given society at a given time considers appropriate for men and women. In addition to the social attributes and opportunities associated with being male and female and the relationships between women and men and girls and boys, gender also refers to the relationships between women and those between men. These attributes, opportunities and relationships are socially constructed and are learned through socialization processes. They are context and time-specific and changeable. Gender determines what is expected, allowed and valued in a woman or a man in a given context. Gender is part of the broader sociocultural context, as are other important criteria for sociocultural analysis, including class, race, poverty level, ethnic group, sexual orientation and age.

Governance
The act, process or power of governing for the organization of society. For example, governance occurs through the state, market or civil society groups and local organizations. Governance is exercised through institutions (laws, property rights systems and forms of social organization).

Green economy
There is no internationally agreed definition of green economy and at least eight separate definitions were identified in recent publications. For example, UNEP has defined the green economy as "one that results in improved human well-being and social equity, while significantly reducing environmental risks and ecological scarcities. It is low carbon, resource efficient, and socially inclusive" (UNEP 2011). This definition has been cited in a number of more recent reports, including by the United Nations Environment Management Group and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). The Green Economy Coalition (a group of NGOs, trade unions and others carrying out green economy grass-roots work) succinctly defines green economy as "a resilient economy that provides a better quality of life for all within the ecological limits of the planet".

Habitat
A habitat is a place or type of site where an organism or population occurs naturally, or terrestrial or aquatic areas that are distinguished by geographic, living and non-living features, whether entirely natural or semi-natural.

Hazardous waste
A used or discarded material that can damage human health and the environment. Hazardous waste may include heavy metals, toxic chemicals, medical waste or radioactive material.

Human health
Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and is not just the absence of disease or infirmity.

Human well-being
The extent to which individuals have the ability to live the kinds of lives they have reason to value and the opportunities to pursue their aspirations. Basic components of human well-being include security, meeting material needs, health and social relations.

Institutions
Regularized patterns of interaction by which society organizes itself, i.e. the rules, practices and conventions that structure human interaction. The term is wide and encompassing, and could be taken to include law, social relationships, property rights and tenure systems, norms, beliefs, customs and codes of conduct, as well as multilateral environmental agreements, international conventions and financing mechanisms. Institutions can be formal (explicit, written, often having the sanction of the state) or informal (unwritten, implied, tacit, mutually agreed and accepted).

Microplastics
Small plastic pieces, less than five millimetres in length, which can be harmful to oceans and aquatic life.

Natural resources
Materials or substances such as minerals, forests, water and fertile land that occur in nature and can be used for economic gain.

Organizations
Bodies of individuals with a specified common objective. These can be political organizations, political parties, governments and ministries; economic organizations and industry federations; social organizations (non-governmental organizations and self-help groups); or religious organizations (churches and religious trusts). The term organizations should be distinguished from institutions.

Pandemic
The worldwide spread of a new disease. An influenza pandemic occurs when a new influenza virus emerges and spreads around the world, to which most people do not have immunity.

Pathogen
A bacterium, virus or other microorganism that can cause disease.

Planetary boundaries
A framework designed to define a safe operating space for humanity for the international community, including governments at all levels, international organizations, civil society, the scientific community and the private sector, as a precondition for sustainable development.

Planetary health
Whitmee et al. [61] define planetary health as "the achievement of the highest attainable standard of health, wellbeing, and equity worldwide through judicious attention to the human systems—political, economic, and social—that shape the future of humanity and the Earth's natural systems that define the safe environmental limits within which humanity can flourish. Put simply, planetary health is the health of human civilisation and the state of the natural systems on which it depends." In 2014 the Rockefeller Foundation and The Lancet jointly formed the Commission on Planetary Health to review the scientific basis for linking human health to the underlying integrity of Earth's natural system.

Policy
Any form of intervention or societal response. This includes not only statements of intent, but also other forms of intervention, such as the use of economic instruments, market creation, subsidies, institutional reform, legal reform, decentralization and institutional development. Policy can be seen as a tool for the exercise of governance. When such an intervention is enforced by the state, it is called public policy.

Pollution
The presence of minerals, chemicals or physical properties at levels that exceed the values deemed to define a boundary between good or acceptable and poor or unacceptable quality, which is a function of the specific pollutant.

Poverty
The state of an individual who lacks a defined amount of material possessions or money. Absolute poverty refers to a state of lacking basic human needs, which commonly include clean and fresh water, nutrition, health care, education, clothing and shelter.

Premature deaths
Deaths occurring earlier due to a risk factor than would occur in the absence of that risk factor.

Private sector
The private sector is the part of a country's economy that comprises industries and commercial companies that are not owned or controlled by the government.

Scale
The spatial, temporal (quantitative or analytical) dimension used to measure and study any phenomena. Specific points on a scale can thus be considered levels (such as local, regional, national and international).

Security
This relates to personal and environmental security. It includes access to natural and other resources, freedom from violence, crime and war, and security from natural and human-caused disasters.

Source
Any process, activity or mechanism that releases a greenhouse gas, an aerosol or a precursor of a greenhouse gas or aerosol into the atmosphere.

Sustainability
A characteristic or state whereby the needs of the present population can be met without compromising the ability of future generations or populations in other locations to meet their needs.

Sustainable development
Development that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

Synergies
These arise when two or more processes, organizations, substances or other agents interact in such a way that the outcome is greater than the sum of their separate effects.

Technology
Physical artefacts or the bodies of knowledge of which they are an expression. Examples include water extraction structures, such as tube wells, renewable energy technologies and traditional knowledge. Technology and institutions are related. Any technology has a set of practices, rules and regulations surrounding its use, access, distribution and management.

Transformation
The state of being transformed. In the context of GEO-5, transformation refers to a series of actions that explores opportunities to stop activities that negatively impact the Earth's natural systems while simultaneously providing resources, capacity and an enabling environment for all that is consistent with the sustainable world vision.

Transitions
Non-linear, systematic and fundamental changes of the composition and functioning of a societal system with changes in structures, cultures and practices.

Trillion
A million million, i.e. 10^12.

Uncertainty

A cognitive state of incomplete knowledge that can result from a lack of information or disagreement about what is known or even knowable. It may have many types of sources, from imprecision in data to ambiguously defined concepts or terminology, or uncertain projections of human behaviour. Uncertainty can therefore be represented by quantitative measures (for example, a probability density function) or qualitative statements (for example, reflecting a team of experts' judgment).

Vulnerability

An intrinsic feature of people at risk. It is a function of exposure to hazards (such as drought, conflict or extreme price fluctuations) and underlying socioeconomic, institutional and environmental conditions, sensitivity to impacts of the specific unit exposed (such as a watershed, island, household, village, city or country) and the ability or inability to cope or adapt. Vulnerability is multidimensional, multidisciplinary, multisectoral and dynamic.